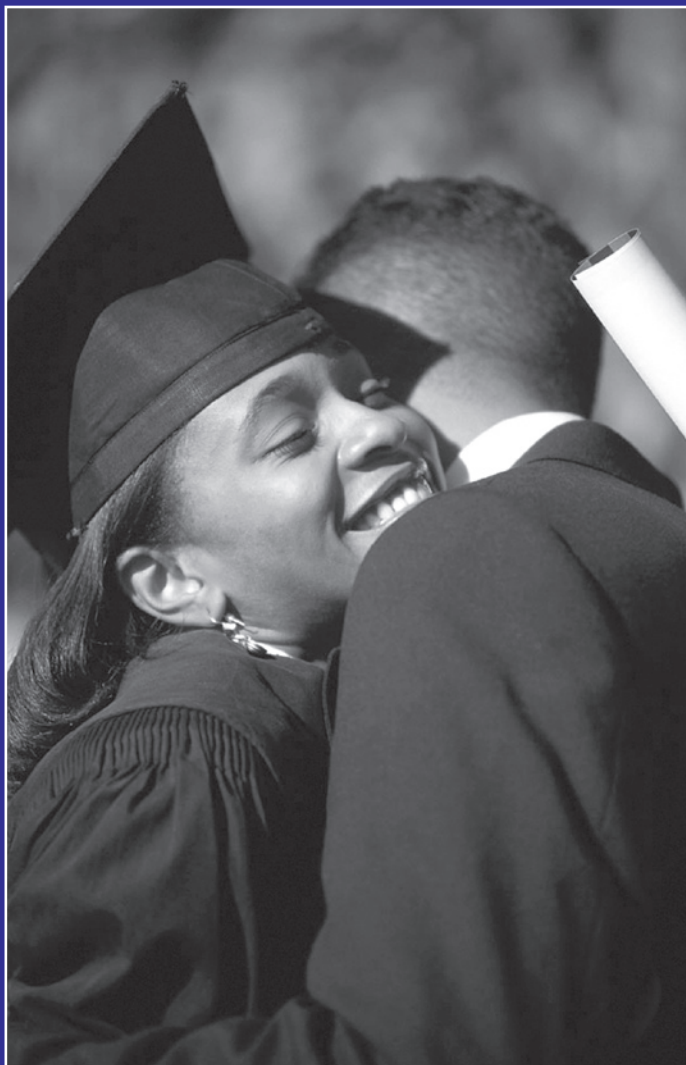
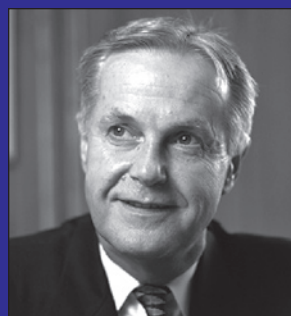


# Getting Districtwide Results



This monograph is based on a keynote presentation by **Angus McBeath** at the *Getting Districtwide Results Conference* in Long Beach, California, which was co-sponsored by the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform and Focus on Results.



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# Getting Districtwide Results

## INTRODUCTION

**E**dmonton is much known for its work on moving money and authority to schools and having programs of choice and open boundaries. We've gotten lots of attention for that work.

*One of the things that happened when we moved all the money out to schools and gave people the power, is that principals developed a sense of efficacy and ownership.*

*And having programs of choice gave our parents lots of desire to be in our system because they could have most of their needs met.*

*Ironically in 2001, when we received the 1999-2000 five-year rolling high school completion rates, our rates showed only 63% of students were completing high school. When we looked at the research on what happens to students who don't complete high school, we found out—which is no surprise to you—you can expect unemployment, low wages, low health outcomes, and substandard neighborhoods are part of life's outcomes for many affected people. And our economy is not producing the kinds of jobs that will pay a livable wage for people to sustain themselves without a high school diploma. Now rather than worry about and agonize about the whole world, we decided we needed to focus on what is the core work of Edmonton Public Schools.*

## TEACHING IS HEROIC

The reason we're all here together, I assume, is we have the same unyielding desire to make sure that all of our children are successful—that the only way you can have a civilized community in which people treat each other respectfully, are gainfully employed, will contribute to the economy and build successful families is through the provision of education.

That means that the most important work done in society is done by teachers. And the second most important work is the work that's done by those who support teaching.



And you've got to say that to yourself every day, because if we waited for everyone else to figure out about how important education is, we'd all starve to death. Educators have to realize every day how important the work of teaching and learning is. It is heroic!

Teachers may not be the Olympic athletes that you see on TV commercials and every news program you turn on. And yet somebody this week, somewhere in California or New Jersey, or in Ontario or Chicago, is going to teach a child to decode print; going to teach a student how to write a sentence; going to teach a student how to do a quadratic equation; going to convince a student to come one more day than that student ever had planned to; going to get that student to complete an assignment that they never wanted to do; going to get a student to behave. Which is going to be life-transforming work! And the only sad thing is that the whole world isn't going to feature that and honor that work.

I just wanted to state that before I talk about the work we did in Edmonton.

## THE CORE WORK

Now rather than worry about and agonize about the whole world, we decided we had to focus on the core work of Edmonton Public Schools. What is the core work? Where does it take place? It takes place in classrooms, notwithstanding all of the distractions that take place in public schools that keep us completely focused on everything else.

Maybe this doesn't happen in your district, but most school districts I've ever known are always caught up in one big thing after another. It could be that you're all obsessed one day because

the mayor has said, "There's too much foolishness going on over here. We've got problems with kids taking drugs. We have problems with kids in the inner-city. We have problems with issues of behavior. We have problem with guns. We have problems with drugs." And that becomes the work of the schools—to solve all of the problems that everybody else hasn't fixed.

Now if you're in education, you know that you're torn in a thousand directions. You know that it's really tough work. You know that you often have to drop the most key thing in order to focus on other things. Very rarely, I think, do we really get true community commitment to the most important thing you do in your district—teach reading, writing, mathematics, the sciences, the arts, and have students graduate from high school and meet standards. We'd rather spend time on crisis and peripheral issues than do the core work and there is no lack of elected people around to help you disburse your time.

## TELLING THE TRUTH

I want to talk about how we took our district and forced it—dragged it, pushed it and pulled it, and shoved it—into a learning organization. The most important thing we did, I think, was we looked at our data. We didn't like it.

So we decided to tell the truth about our data. And that was very uncomfortable for a lot of people. It was very uncomfortable for our principals; very uncomfortable for our elected officials and me. And if you phoned our district right now and were on hold, you would hear about the things they're working on, the things they're getting better at, and things where they're not good.

Is it embarrassing to admit you're not doing a good job? Yes, it is, but everybody already knew. People were worried that if we told people how weak we were in terms of high school completion, we might lose a sizeable number of our students. We might lose their parents. The media might tell everybody how bad we're doing. I said, "They already know. They just want to know if we have any integrity." People don't mind hearing that your district isn't always doing good work. What they mind is that you're covering it up and you don't have a plan about how to address your shortcomings.

*So we discovered that the antidote to the high school dropout rate—that is, the high school students who dropped out of the system—was let's look at the high school completion data. And at a later district training, we played the survivor game with high school teachers which graphically illustrated what happens when you register in a grade ten math course, how many of you fail, how many of you drop out, and who's left for grade eleven, and who's left for grade twelve. And they were uncomfortable and mortified when we used real district data from one of our high schools to show the adults how badly students have had it. Because the old way of showing data had it looking like they had about a 92% success rate. That was a 92% success rate for the survivors, right? So of our very best students who managed to stick in for three years, this many succeeded on a standardized test.*

So when I was put in charge of the quality of student achievement in this district, I discovered that I didn't know what to do. I was unhappy. I needed support. Nobody said, in this 80,000-some student district, "We won't bother you with the other disturbing things about being a superintendent. We won't bother you with transportation, new construction, and collective agreements." I had all the regular work of a superintendent to do but I also had this desire to improve student learning, and I was embarrassed and ashamed by the lack of support that we provided to our staff and was worried about how we let kids down. I was even more worried about how we let the adults in the system down. Let's ask people to do work they can't do, don't know how to do, can't get support around, and then let's complain bitterly about how weak our staff is.



## THE DARWINIAN SCHOOL OF TEACHING

Now this would never happen in the U.S. When I graduated from college with shiny degrees including a teaching degree, when I went into my first classroom, my principal handed me some books, put me in the room, turned the key, and I think was quite content for me to spend my thirty years there by myself.

What nobody told me is that I didn't know how to teach reading. I'd never learned how to teach reading, and, my gosh, I had non-readers in my room. They were still non-readers at the end of the year. I didn't know it was my job to teach reading.

My principal only came in once or twice. I didn't tell her I didn't teach reading. She didn't seem interested in my reading capacity. Nobody else knew. Nobody had talked to each other about this matter. I was alone in there with those students. And the next year, I had the same phenomena, and thereafter.

And I moved 3,200 miles to another city, into Edmonton where I stayed thirty years, and I thought, well, in this enlightened place, things will be different. I took eight reading courses in addition to my three degrees and thought: now I know something. When I went to my room, I was no better at teaching reading.

And I realized I was all alone on my own again, and it didn't matter. My principal was a great person, and he did whatever the important work was in the school,

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*You cannot assume that every day you come to school, those students want to be there or they want to do the work. So every day, you've got to trick them, fool them, convince them, push them, drag them, pull them, motivate them, hold them accountable, and engage them—all day long, every day.*

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and I saw him occasionally in the staff room or when we needed stuff. But it was clear I wasn't doing important work in the building because he spent no time with me.

And when I became a principal—and I had a master's degree in administration—I had no idea what was important and what my job was. I guess it's called the Darwinian school of management. I'd been through the Darwinian school of teaching. Now I was in the Darwinian school of management—by the way, there's the Darwinian school of superintendents too! Thank God somebody that's doing heart surgery on me—or my loved one—didn't know as little as I did about the work. I think we assume that university or college preparation is sufficient for teachers in the classroom to work alone when, on the other hand, we provide tremendous support for doctors and lawyers, for example, before they are left to work on their own.



## SUPPORTING TEACHERS TO CHANGE THEIR PRACTICE

We would never turn out a freshly minted doctor and say, “Go operate on somebody” without three or four years of practice—guided practice. Practice with supervision. Practice with pressure. Practice with support. Practice with a lead doctor. But we turn out teachers, put them in rooms, ignore them. And some of them surrender, some of them give up, some of them quit. And some of them get better. But is there a consistent way to make sure that every single teacher is good? Is there a consistent way to make sure every student performs well and meets standards?

Now there may be little flowers who come to school, who just die to do all the work that we give them. I never had a class full of them. Learning to read, learning to write, learning to do math, learning to paint, learning to attend, learning to listen, learning to organize, learning to do your homework, learning to do assignments to specification, requires massive amounts of practice. Teachers every day have to trick their kids into doing what they don’t want to do. That’s why it’s so exhausting. You cannot assume that every day you come to school, those students want to be there or they want to do the work. So every day, you’ve got to trick them, fool them, convince them, push them, drag them, pull them, motivate them, hold them accountable, and engage them—all day long, every day. You don’t get the hour between two and three off, where the students say, “I’ll be real good between two and three. You don’t have to do a thing. I’ll listen and write and cal-



culate, and diagram and you won’t need to do any hard work. You won’t have to do any instructional hard work. It’s your little hour off for the day.” Ah, students don’t do that.

Our teachers in Edmonton, when we said to them, “Identify an instructional focus,” were very positive. They knew that could figure how out to use data to identify the academic weakness in their school. Getting them to work in a teacher team and having an instructional leadership team—not that hard to do. Getting teachers to identify three to five best practices was a little hard. Getting teachers to take three years to go through balanced literacy training and be coached, and to practice back at the school—that was a lot harder because that wasn’t what teachers were usually doing in our system.

Teachers like to select their own professional development, go to their own workshops provided by the district. There was cynicism in our district because in the past they would come back from professional development and workshops and say, “That didn’t change my teaching at all.” Teachers were very disillusioned and they were naturally resistant.

## THE WORK OF PRINCIPALS

So I said to principals, in my view, the work of being a principal means getting others to do willingly that which they don’t want to do. And a lot of principals had a real struggle, asking, “How do I get into a classroom? How do I start the conversation with the teacher? How do I coach a teacher? How do I hold the teacher accountable? How do I get them to do professional development they don’t want to do? How can I make sure it’s job-embedded? What will I do if it doesn’t go well? I don’t know very much about instruction.”

So my call to the principals was: you need to show leadership. We could not assume that our principals would know how to sit down and teach our teachers how to work collaboratively. We could not assume our principals could sit down with teachers and say: here’s a piece of student work; let’s have a protocol for looking at that student work. Principals didn’t necessarily know how to do that work.

And this work in Edmonton was all about building respect for teachers, supporting teachers, teachers feeling more successful, teachers not surrendering, teachers not giving up and then still working. Because there's nothing worse than being a teacher when you're not supported; it isn't good. It's cruel and inhumane!

## IMPROVEMENT CANNOT BE RANDOM

What we realized is that we could not at random improve and lever up the achievement for all students in the Edmonton district unless we had some support. We contracted with an external turn-around group of partners (Focus on Results) who provided us with a framework for how to proceed at the district level as well as at the school level, with our district being in charge of how it was going to go. Because we claimed we were a unique culture—every district is. Every district is different from every other district. And you can't impose some external framework on that district unless there's harmony between that framework and the local culture.

We started with a pilot at some schools to work with this seven area framework. The next year, I became superintendent and I convinced 182 out of 203 schools to be in the year-one work. And then in the next two years, I invited those people who were not part of the initial work, as a special favor to me, to join this multi-year process, to join the rest of us.

Out of the framework that our turn-around partners gave us, we developed in Edmonton seven expectations. I want to give them to you in a nutshell and in my language, not the precise language that you will find in the book, *"The Power of Focus."*<sup>1</sup>

**EXPECTATION #1: Find an area of academic weakness** in your school that probably has a negative effect on all of your results. What was it? It was almost inevitably reading. Fourteen of our high schools said it was reading.

**EXPECTATION #2: Develop a teacher leadership team** along with the principal to be a guiding coalition in the school that would help people sustain the work, do the work, keep it moving, and to think about things like how do we provide high-quality, job-embedded staff development to all of our staff and especially to all of the teachers.

**EXPECTATION #3: Select three to five high-quality, tried-and-true best practices** that every teacher would use in every classroom with every student every day in every subject area.

**EXPECTATION #4: Target professional development.** When the schools had identified the three to five best practices, we said: "During the year, you've got to direct your professional development to ensure that each teacher will use those three to five best practices consistently."

Of course, I'm telling it faster than they did it. And three to five best practices was as hard as climbing Mount Olympus backwards—trust me—and taking your grandmother with you.

**EXPECTATION #5: Realign everything in the school in support of your academic weakness** or what we called an instructional focus. If reading was your focus and reading is important to learning, realign everything in the school in support of reading.

**EXPECTATION #6: Have an internal accountability system** in the school where you would check every month or two, using internal measures, to see how it was going, and then have a conversation about these practices we've been using. We've measured; we've reported and pasted it on the wall, and here's how we did. Now what does that say about our practice and what modifications to practice should we make?

**EXPECTATION #7: Principals as instructional leaders.** And then I asked the principals to be in classrooms 50% of the instructional day, which, in Edmonton, was the tsunami of August 2001. A few said, "We can't be in classrooms every day because you've given us all this management work to do."

<sup>1</sup>Log onto <http://www.focusonresults.net/index.html> to learn more about more about Focus on Results and to order the book *"Power of Focus."*

Log onto <http://www.focusonresults.net/results/index.html> to see the improvement data from Edmonton and other school districts.

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I said, “For years, some of you said we are so tired because you give us all this management work to do. We long to be instructional leaders. That’s why we went into education.” So I said, “I’d like to come today and help you fulfill your longing to be instructional leaders. I want you to be in rooms up to 50% of the time.”

There was push-back. And we ameliorated it ever so slightly by saying, “This is what we consider principals work in classroom. Here’s some of the work you could be doing.”

## CHANGING CENTRAL OFFICE

The hardest part for me was that I and the cabinet had to get external coaching. And the external coaching was also the very best part for me because it’s really hard to try and change a whole classroom, a whole school, or a whole district.

What was the coaching all about? How to get me to do work—how to convince me to do hard work that I already thought was too hard, was too difficult, politically it couldn’t be accomplished.

We found that going to site-based management didn’t make central office focus on student achievement. It made them responsive—it did turn around central a lot. Today, our principals are asked every year anonymously to rate each central department, and each central department has an approval rating between about 87% and 99 to 100%. So their regard for central is extremely high.

But we found that our system’s central office was one big machine designed to make teaching and learning challenging. Not deliberately—*de facto*, not *de jure*—too many manuals, too many ladders, too many rules, too many provisions.

Regrettably, they did not know how to focus on teaching and learning. First of all, one department spokesperson said, “But we have nothing to do with teaching and learning.” That was an obvious understatement and even our departments closest to instruction were not all that focused on teaching and learning.

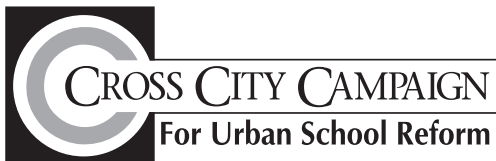
What did we discover in central? Even more resistance than we had in schools about wanting to do this work. What did we have to do with our central people? We had to work with them to come up with their own expectations. We had to work with them to develop their own collaboration teams, to come up with very specific ways of supporting schools, of monitoring it, monitoring it, monitoring it.

I visited an urban district not too long ago. The first thing some bright young thing from central office said to me was, “We’re gonna fire all these guys.” I said, “Excuse me, you just told me nobody has a job description. Nobody has roles and responsibilities. Nobody’s gotten any coaching. Nobody’s got any support. Nobody’s got any supervision. They don’t get a written performance evaluation. And now you’ve decided?” He was a non-educator who thought all educators were kind of witless, I guess, with the idea of “let’s just get rid of them all.” I said, “Well, you’ve got a long road to travel before you start getting rid of people. And if you talk any more like that you’ll be the first on the list to go.”

So we decided—let’s do it badly instead of not doing it at all. And if we do it badly the first year, we’ll improve it.”

*Editor’s note—Over the past six years, Edmonton Public Schools has made significant gains in student achievement as is evidenced by rising test scores and increased graduation rates.*

*For more information visit [www.e-psb.ca/index.shtml](http://www.e-psb.ca/index.shtml).*



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The Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform is a national network of parents, advocates, community organizers, teachers, principals, central office administrators, policy analysts, union officials, researchers, and funders dedicated to improving public schools and education for urban young people. We currently operate in nine cities—Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Seattle. Our mission is to fundamentally transform urban public education, resulting in improved quality and equity, so that all youth are well prepared for post-secondary education, work, and citizenship. For more information visit [www.crosscity.org](http://www.crosscity.org)

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For more than ten years, Focus On Results has been working with schools and districts across the United States and Canada to make measurable, lasting improvements in student performance, school leadership and decision-making, and professional development. For more information visit [www.focusonresults.net](http://www.focusonresults.net)